Abstract

The Transformation of Japanese Cuisine as Intangible Heritage

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French, Mediterranean (Greek, Italian, Moroccan and Spanish) and Mexican food traditions were formally incorporated into the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2010. Such “national” cuisines, as well as others that have not been designated intangible heritage (as yet), are usually implied to have evolved or developed from indigenous knowledge and skills of local communities in the countries the cuisines represent. However, closer scrutiny of the modern history of these culinary heritages would reveal that although indigenous or local knowledge may have strongly affected their development, the roles played by a few influential individuals—culinary “powerbrokers”—were more critical in shaping the current forms and content, among other distinguishing characteristics, of these food traditions. Modern French cuisine, for example, is more the result of its (re)invention by a few chefs and gastronomes than by the people of France in the 19th century. Japanese cuisine, too, has developed mainly through certain individuals and groups who happened to be in the right place and the right time in Japanese food history, rather than through consensus among the general Japanese population.

This study forms part of an ongoing investigation into the contemporary transformation of Japanese cuisine, especially as it seeks formal UNESCO recognition as intangible heritage. The paper identifies the major and current permutations of Japanese cuisine, not only as such (“Japanese cuisine”) but also as “Japanese food culture” and “washoku [literally, Japanese food],” terms that were officially recognized and deliberated on during public meetings recently held by the Japanese government on the matter of delineating the boundaries and definition of Japanese cuisine, in light of its possible qualification for intangible heritage designation. Documents and materials from said meetings, as well as ethnographic notes and media coverage, are used as primary references. These are analyzed and discussed with particular focus on how Japanese cuisine is currently transformed not from within but through forces outside its usual milieu, particularly by UNESCO’s discourse on intangible heritage and French gastronomic discourse. The discussion also mentions the actual and potential effects that such a transformation would entail, not only for Japanese cuisine but also for intangible heritage in general.